



Dueling with Uncertainty: The New Logic of American Military Planning

Carl Conetta and Charles Knight
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It was remarkable testimony for a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs: "I'm running out of demons. I'm down to Kim Il Sung and Castro." The context for General Colin Powell's 1991 remarks to Congress was the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact and America's recent victory in the Gulf War. When the Soviet Union collapsed soon after, an article in Aerospace Daily, a leading defense industry newsletter, recalled Powell's remarks and predicted: "Pentagon Budget Headed for \$150 Billion -- Half Current Level -- By 1996."

What a difference six years can make. Introducing the May 1997 Quadrennial Defense Review, Defense Secretary William Cohen warned that "new threats and dangers, harder to define and more difficult to track, have gathered on the horizon." Contrary to Aerospace Daily's forecast, Secretary Cohen sees keeping the Pentagon budget at \$250 billion or slightly more -- about 77 percent of the 1991 level.

A Counsel of Pessimism

The 1997 *Quadrennial Defense Review* seeks to lead the United States into the next century with a defense budget only 23 percent lower than the average for the Cold War period of 1976-1990. Despite Secretary Cohen's warning, however, there is no profusion of actual threats to justify this course. The preservation of high-levels of spending instead reflects a novel way of thinking and talking about military requirements.

Beginning with efforts at the RAND Corporation during the late 1980's, the focus of defense planners has shifted from "the clear and present danger" of Soviet power to the intractable problem of "uncertainty." Along with this shift has come a new type of Pentagon partisan -- the "uncertainty hawk."

Uncertainty Hawks forsake "threat-based" planning for new methods variously called "adaptive," "capability-based," or "scenario-based" planning. These methods seek to release planning from the "tyranny of scenario plausibility," as RAND analyst James Winnefeld puts it.^{1} Any hypothetical danger that seems remotely "possible" is deemed worthy of attention. In this approach, the concrete assessment of interests, adversaries, and trends matters less than does the unfettered exercise of "worst case" thinking.

A fixation on uncertainty colors all of the major post-Cold War policy blueprints -- the 1993 *Bottom Up Review*, the Quadrennial Review, the Joint Staff's Joint Vision 2010, and even the independent National Defense Panel report, *Transforming Defense*, which was issued in December, 1997. Lost in these documents, however, is any real appreciation of America's profound post-Cold War security windfall.

Puzzling Evidence

Today no nation even approximates America's singular combination of size, stability, economic vitality, military prowess, and geographic insulation. The strength of America's allies further reinforces its substantial security margin. The countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development -- the "West" -- now constitute three-quarters of the world economy; these states plus other long-time American allies account for 72 percent of world military spending. By comparison, current and potential adversary states -- including Russia and China -- account for 18 percent. This adds perspective to the recent decline in Pentagon spending. Despite the cuts, America's share of worldwide military spending increased from 27.5 to 32 percent between 1986 and 1995. Whereas the United States spent only two-thirds as much on defense as did "potential threat states" in 1986, it spent 76 percent more than this group in 1995. {2}

Western dominance is reflected also in arms transfer trends. Between 1986 and 1995 the US share of the arms export market grew from 22 percent to 49 percent; the aggregate share of NATO countries grew from 44 percent to 78 percent. This change occurred in the context of a 55 percent contraction in the market. Thus, not only has the general diffusion of military power slowed dramatically, it has come substantially under the control of the United States and its allies.

A Shattered Calculus

Attention to details confirms what the overview of global trends suggests. But recent official analyses miss both the forest and the trees. With the collapse of Soviet power and the return of US defense spending to pre-Reagan levels, threat assessment has taken a great leap backward. The 1993 *Bottom Up Review* set the post-Cold War standard, promoting the image of regional "rogues" wielding huge arsenals of armored vehicles and combat aircraft --so much dead weight, as the Gulf War showed.

All tanks are not equal, as the Gulf War amply demonstrated. Quality makes a difference. A simplistic "bean count" of the North Korean arsenal shows a country commanding almost 4000 tanks and more than 700 combat aircraft. However, a 1995 study by the Brookings Institution that uses a Pentagon methodology to take quality into account, cuts the challenge down to size. {3} It shows the North Korean military possessing the American equivalent of less than 4.5 heavy divisions and 2.5 fighter wings -- about 1500 tanks and 250 fighters. And even this calculation overlooks America's war-winning advantages in troop quality, logistics, communications, intelligence, and information systems.

The *Bottom Up Review* also glossed over the considerable and growing capabilities of America's regional allies. Looking at the Korean balance, the Brookings analysis shows the North's advantage

over the South to equal about one and one-third US divisions and an equal amount of air wings. Against this net requirement the *Bottom Up Review* prescribed deploying the equivalent of 3.5 heavy division and 14 air wings as well as 100 bombers. Meant to satisfy the demand for "decisive force," this proposed allocation instead fed a debate over whether the Pentagon could pull it off in two theaters at once.

Twilight of the Rogue Giants

Rather than redress the *Bottom Up Review*'s shortcomings, last year's *Quadrennial Defense Review* compounded them. Notably, it failed to revise the estimate of regional foes, despite their having suffered four years of decline. In contrast, the National Defense University's *Strategic Assessment 1997*, which is not an official document, has observed that the Korean situation was "significantly different at the end of 1996 than it was in 1993." Surveying the poor state of the armed forces and economies of both North Korea and Iraq, the *Strategic Assessment* concluded that the United States most likely would face "declining military challenges in both areas, especially in Korea."

Turning to Iran, the other bete noire of US planners, the Assessment similarly found that its conventional forces "on the whole are not improving" and their "ability to conquer ground is deteriorating." The Iranian military has not recovered from the Iran-Iraq war, nor has the Iranian economy recovered from the 1979 revolution. Economic stagnation and sanctions together have held Iran's planned \$10 billion military modernization program to less than 40 percent of its goals.

The concurrent decline of North Korean, Iraqi, and Iranian power is not merely fortuitous. Stripped of superpower patronage, these nations stand exposed to global trends that distinctly disfavor rigid and narrow economies. The military ascent of these states, and others like them, was dependent on a circumstance that no longer exists: the East-West Cold War.

The Masque of Uncertainty

Against the evidence of diminished and diminishing threat, the "uncertainty hawks" erect a view of the strategic environment as thoroughly turbulent and allowing few, if any, reliable forecasts. "The real world defies prediction," advises RAND Corporation analyst James Winnefeld. David Abshire, president of the Center of Strategic and International Studies, borrows the language of chaos theory to describe the post-Cold War period: "The new strategic landscape is not rigid and linear but highly fluid and unpredictable."⁴ Uncertainty and instability form the central motif of both the *Quadrennial Defense Review* and *Transforming Defense*. Similarly, *Joint Vision 2010* frames its force development program with the observation that "accelerating rates of change will make the future environment more unpredictable and less stable."

The agnosticism of the Uncertainty Hawks extends not only to the specifics of discrete future events, such as the succession in Russia or Iran, but also to the general character and magnitude of possible threats. Uncertainty envelops events and trends equally. Even with regard to our future national interests, we are groping in twilight, if not the dark. "Uncertainty is a dominating characteristic of the landscape," according to Paul Davis, editor of a 1994 compendium of RAND Corporation planning studies, *New Challenges for Defense Planning*. "Most striking," writes Davis, "is the fact that we do not even know who or what will constitute the most serious future threat."

{5} This artful formulation eludes the significance of America's post-Cold War status as sole global military superpower, and it distracts from the poverty of today's potential threats by wondering who will rank first among them. (What is truly "most striking" is the fact that questions such as these now mesmerize America's preeminent defense planners, supplanting yesterday's more mundane problems -- such as gauging the Soviet capacity to launch one million prime troops in a short-warning assault across the European front.)

The new planning methods supposedly tame uncertainty by varying the assumptions that drive military planning -- assumptions about America's future national interests, the identity and number of possible threats, the character and magnitude of these threats, how fast they can develop, and how quickly the United States can respond. The end result is a vast array of hypothetical conflict scenarios that serve to define US military requirements.

In a 1992 report prepared for the Joint Staff, RAND Corporation analyst James Winnefeld argues that in order to tame uncertainty planners must break free of the "tyranny of scenario plausibility" and consider "discontinuous scenarios...in which there is no plausible audit trail or storyline from current events."{6} Among the "non-standard" scenarios that RAND Corporation analysts favor are defense of the Ukraine or the Baltic states against Russia, civil wars in Russia and Algeria, a variety of wars with China, contention with Germany, and wars aligning Iraq and Syria against Turkey, and Iraq and Iran against Saudi Arabia.

More discretely, the Quadrennial Defense Review uses unnamed "wild card" scenarios to help define requirements. Although describing these as individually improbable, the Review asserts that, given a whole set, there is a better than even chance that one or more will occur. Of course, to catch those "one or more" the United States would have to hedge against the whole pack. One of the Pentagon's "wild cards" may be a scenario involving war in 2015 with China and North Korea, which the Navy used recently to test the cost-effectiveness of its planned SC-21 surface combatant.

Playing with Wild Cards

Without doubt, simulations -- including nonstandard ones -- can aid planning. The question is: To what end? And to what effect? Exploring "wild cards" in order to identify warning signs or to define limits is one thing; Using them to establish force structure or modernization requirements, quite another. Especially suspect would be using scenarios that are detached from declared US interests to define current requirements; this would put the military "cart" before the political "horse." Another, broader concern is how the effusion of improbable conflict scenarios affects public policy discourse overall.

Conflict scenarios, both wild and tame, can gain more credibility in the telling than they deserve. Cognitive researcher Massimo Piattelli-Palmarini calls this the "Othello effect," referring to the trail of plausible but false suppositions that led Othello to murder his wife, Desdemona. Even the most farfetched scenarios comprise a number of steps or links each of which may seem plausible or even probable given the one that came before. Although the likelihood of the scenario dwindles with each step, the residual impression is one of plausibility. Omitted are the many branches at each step that would lead to a neutral or even positive outcome. The resulting snapshots, although numerous, offer a highly-selective view of what the future may hold. And the fact that only the negative outcomes are articulated and exercised can distort the general public impression of risk.

Living with Uncertainty

There is no escape from uncertainty, but there is relief from uncertainty hysteria. It begins with recognizing that instability has boundaries -- just as turbulence in physical systems has discernable onset points and parameters. The turbulence of a river, for instance, corresponds to flow and to the contours of the river's bed and banks. It occurs in patches and not randomly. The weather also is a chaotic system that resists precise long-range forecasting, but allows useful prediction of broader trends and limits.

Despite uncertainty, statements of probability matter. They indicate the weight of evidence -- or whether there is any evidence at all. The Uncertainty Hawks would flood our concern with a horde of dangers that pass their permissive test of "non-zero probability." However, by lowering the threshold of alarm, they establish an impossible standard of defense sufficiency: absolute and certain military security. Given finite resources and competing ends, something less will have to do. Strategic wisdom begins with the setting of priorities -- and priorities demand strict attention to what appears likely and what does not.

The world may be less certain and less stable today than during the Cold War, but it also involves less risk for America. Risk is equal parts probability and utility -- chances and stakes. With the end of global superpower contention, America's stakes in most of the world's varied conflicts has diminished. So has the magnitude of the military threats to American interests. This permits a sharper distinction between interests and compelling interests, turbulence and relevant turbulence, uncertainties and critical uncertainties. And this distinction will pay dividends whenever the country turns to consider large-scale military endeavors, commitments, and investments.

From Two War to New War

More than any other force development goal, the ability to fight and quickly win two near-simultaneous major regional wars has kept defense spending high. And it has fed the impression of military readiness and modernization shortfalls. Although both the 1993 and 1997 reviews linked the two-war requirement to Korean and Persian Gulf scenarios, they also described these as merely illustrative. Officially, the two war requirement is generic. As the *Quadrennial Review* put it: "We can never know with certainty when or where the next major theater war will occur" or "who our next adversary will be." The issue, however, is not our ability to predict events, but our willingness to clarify and weigh interests -- at least when it comes to sending hundreds of thousands of Americans to war.

Outside Europe only the Korean peninsula and the Persian Gulf qualify as areas in which perceived US interests, vulnerable allies, and significant threats might converge to compel very large-scale US intervention. Recognizing this helps to contain both uncertainty and requirements. Similarly, stricter attention to risk factors would put into perspective the supposed need for a capability to fight and win two major wars simultaneously.

Since 1945 the United States has fought three major regional conflicts -- one every 15 or 20 years. Whether the future holds more major wars or less, two war contingencies will occur much less often than single ones -- even if war in one region boosts the chances of an attack elsewhere. A

"second war capability" might cost America two-thirds as much as the first -- perhaps \$50 billion a year. But it would serve its full purpose only a fraction as often. Is it worth spending \$3 trillion dollars over 60 years to meet a double war contingency that might occur only once? Yes, if delaying a full response to the second war would entail a catastrophic loss for the nation. This is the type of bargain we accepted during the Cold War, but today's regional war scenarios do not fit the bill. What they lack are adversaries and interests of sufficient magnitude.

The *Quadrennial Defense Review* holds tenaciously to the two war strategy as originally conceived, but cracks are appearing elsewhere in the consensus. Senator Charles Robb has proposed a variety of more economical ways to meet a two war requirement, including greater reliance on the reserves to "fill out" the second war capability. The December 1997 National Defense Panel report calls the entire concept into question. Noting that "the current posture minimizes near-term risk at a time when danger is [already] moderate to low," the Panel worries that the two war construct "may have become a force-protection mechanism -- a means of justifying the current force structure." However, the Panel does not hold out any hope of budget reductions. Instead, it seeks to redirect more resources toward preparing for the putative security challenges of the post-2010 world. These gather under the headings of "asymmetric warfare," "military-technical revolution," and a "re-emergent peer competitor".

Asymmetric Warfare

Both 1997 defense reviews and *Joint Vision 2010* speculate that the West's foes will turn to unconventional methods and weapons to sap or circumvent Western strengths. The Quadrennial Review foresees "increasingly sophisticated asymmetric challenges involving the use of chemical, biological, and possibly nuclear weapons; attacks against the information systems of our forces and national infrastructure" as well as insurgency, terrorism, and environmental destruction. *Joint Vision 2010* asserts that "our most vexing future adversary may be one who can use rapid improvements in its military capabilities that provide asymmetrical counters to US strengths, including information technologies." Content to register these possibilities, however, the reports decline to explore their limits or gauge how much of a problem they pose.

The Vietnam War amply illustrated the potential of asymmetric warfare -- and its limits as well. Although masters of unconventional war, the North Vietnamese and their Viet Cong allies were dependent for success on the shield and support of a superpower -- the Soviet Union -- as well as neighboring China. Outside similar circumstances, the potential of asymmetric methods is limited.

In the post-Soviet era, few if any "non-peer" nations would plan or attempt a major military confrontation with the United States, although they might blunder into it, as Iraq did in 1990. Still, none can afford to set aside the funds needed to indulge dare-the-superpower fantasies, even by asymmetric means. Primarily, what will shape the armed forces of regional powers and developing nations in the coming decades will be local challenges such as old-fashioned cross-border threats and internal insurgencies.

The real core of the asymmetric warfare threat involves the spread of cheap ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction. This poses a real, but well-defined potential threat -- mostly to US regional operations. Relative to former-Soviet capabilities, the threat is quite limited, involving a

handful of countries. All of the recent defense reviews implicitly acknowledge this, seeking to devote only a small part of US military forces and investment to meeting this challenge specifically.

To find a more sophisticated and comprehensive threat, scenario writers must work backwards from perceived Western vulnerabilities. "What would it take to defeat the United States?" is the question that conjures their visions of asymmetric warfare. But the fact that we can spot theoretical "windows of vulnerability" in the edifice of Western strength does not mean that real-world foes can climb through them. And it certainly does not mean that enemy ladders are already rising against our walls.

Technology Diffusion

When Uncertainty Hawks turn to assess the danger of technology diffusion, the actual capabilities and efforts of potential foes matter less than their theoretical access to the military marketplace. The National Defense Panel, for instance, sees the world providing "all nations with more or less equal access to defense-related technologies." *Joint Vision* leaves no doubt about where this leads: "Wider access to advanced technology along with modern weaponry...and the requisite skills to maintain and employ it will increase the number of actors with sufficient military potential to upset existing regional balances of power."

What is lacking is any general evidence of a rising curve of technological competence among our likely adversaries. Russel Travers, an analyst with the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), surveys the modernization efforts of America's allies and adversaries alike in a Spring 1997 *Washington Quarterly* article, concluding that the idea that America is in danger of losing its technological superiority "does not hold up." Similarly, in a 1994 *Foreign Affairs* article Ethan Kapstein of Harvard University's Olin Institute anticipates that "by the early 21st century, the United States will be the sole producer of the world's most advanced weaponry." This is because "rising costs and declining defense budgets are putting pressure on the world's inefficient defense producers, and most of them are collapsing under the strain."

In the real-world marketplace, nations' access to cutting-edge weapon systems is quite selective and differentiated -- like an individual's access to Maserati sports cars. And more so today than yesterday. The plain fact is that all but a handful of nations lack the capacity to build, buy, integrate, support, and effectively use cutting-edge military systems in significant quantity. The shortcomings of lesser-developed countries are rooted in socio-economic conditions that, in most cases, show no near-term prospect for improvement. They may attempt to absorb elements of advanced technology and fighting concepts -- but, lacking a superpower patron, none are likely to be nearly so successful as Iraq circa 1990. Nevertheless, the reliance on theoretical "market access" to gauge the diffusion problem treats anyone's technology as though it were everyone's. Thus, every advance in American capabilities can serve to rationalize the next. This portends a continuous, solitary arms race in which the United States labors to outdistance its own shadow. In the end, technical feasibility alone defines requirements.

As with asymmetric warfare, the real core of the diffusion threat is proliferation of medium-range missiles and weapons of mass destruction. The prospect of any more intensive technological competition than this hinges on the emergence of a new, major rival to the United States.

The Threat with No Name

The *Quadrennial Review* sees the rise of a peer competitor as improbable before 2015. However, like the *Bottom Up Review*, it hedges against an earlier than expected arrival. To help decide near-term policy, the *Review* relies on simulations of war in 2014 with what might be called a "half-way peer" -- a regional great power with armed forces significantly larger and more capable than those of Iraq, Iran, or North Korea.

The plausibility of this scenario depends on its details, which the *Quadrennial Review* typically neglects to provide. Who is this threat? Why are we fighting it? What capabilities have planners given it? Even setting these questions aside, fighting simulated contests 17 years in advance begs the issue of how best to prepare for challenges that do not exist today and may not exist tomorrow.

The regional great powers and peer competitors that presently enthrall planners are only hypothetical constructs. Separating hypothesis from reality would be a process of emergence. Superpowers do not take shape easily or quickly. Their advent takes time and involves an extraordinary convergence of circumstances and trends -- political, economic, geographical, and military. Tracking these provides a way to gauge the real danger of peer emergence.

Meeting the challenge of a peer rival, should one begin to gestate, would involve a race between its emergence and the ability of the United States to reconstitute a sufficient additional military power. Given America's incomparable military-industrial base, it would enjoy a unique advantage in any such competition. Today's huge gap between the United States and any potential rival defines America's strategic reaction time -- its margin of safety.

But not for Uncertainty Hawks. They argue that the historical example of Nazi Germany's rapid ascent makes a reconstitution strategy untenable. But modern armed forces take much longer to develop than during the 1930s; combat vehicle and aircraft development, for instance, takes three to five times as long. And even in the 1930s major threats did not spring up full grown. Already by 1928 Germany's manufacturing output was fifty percent of the combined total of France, Great Britain, and Russia, and its per capita output was much higher. By 1935 it was leading the world in defense spending. Today, America must look among its allies to find any remotely comparable potential competitor -- and none of these spend one-fifth as much as we do on defense.

The prime candidates for future peer rival status are Russia and China. A dozen years of dedicated investment might resuscitate a significant portion of the Russian armed forces, as it did ours after 1978. But Russia's military has much further to go than did America's -- it is in ruins -- and Russia must first rehabilitate its economy and governing structures. The Chinese prospect is even longer term. If its economy holds out, it might in 30 years compare economically to the United States as Poland does to Sweden today. That might put a Soviet-style challenge within its reach. In the meantime, China is just beginning to inject 1980s technology into select portions of its armed forces. Their feeble 1996 exercises around Taiwan suggest not much improvement in power projection capability since the disastrous 1979 tangle with Vietnam. The *Strategic Assessment* surmises that China's military in 1996 was "probably two decades away from challenging or holding its own against a modern military force." Paul Goodwin of the National War College puts "the window for China becoming one of the world's major military powers...at somewhere between 2020 and 2050." Surveying the prospects worldwide Russell Travers, the DIA analyst, concludes

that "no military or technical peer competitor to the United States is on the horizon for at least a couple of decades."⁷

Certain Force

Uncertainty has breathed new life into declining and hypothetical threats. And current policy prescribes that the US military do more than simply prepare to respond to these. The Quadrennial Review proposes an expanded peacetime role for the Pentagon in shaping the strategic environment. "Environment shaping" is meant to encompass all the diffuse ways, apart from crisis response, that the US military might protect and promote US interests. Key to environment shaping are overseas presence, military assistance programs, and military-to-military contacts.

An important environment shaping goal for the Pentagon is to discourage military competition with America and stem the emergence of hostile regional hegemony. As the Quadrennial Review sees it, the United States can stop difficult relationships from evolving into military contests by projecting a sense of overwhelming American power. And it can stem arms races by winning them in advance. Of course, this assumes that countries will not view such peremptory moves as provocative or as providing sufficient reason to gear up their own military efforts. The Strategic Assessment 1997 warns that this type of dissuasion is a "two-edged sword" because it may "lead others to believe that their interests are at risk, in which case they may decide they have no choice other than the use of force." More generally, the Pentagon's increased interest in environment shaping suggests to some observers an incursion on the traditional domain of diplomatic and nonmilitary initiatives. The National Defense Panel largely avoids the term, and it strongly affirms that the "most effective tool" for enhancing regional stability "should be diplomacy."

The goals and methods of the Quadrennial Review lead it to embrace a uniquely high standard for defense sufficiency: the maintenance of US military superiority over current and potential rivals. As Defense Secretary Cohen sees the current situation, "Without such superiority, our ability to exert global leadership and to create international conditions conducive to the achievement of our national goals would be in doubt."

Tunnel Vision

Among the visions that guide present policy, one is absent conspicuously: a world in which economic issues have displaced military ones as the central focus of global competitions and concerns. Failing to engage this prospect, the recent defense policy reviews are oblivious to the opportunity cost of military spending. And it is this lapse that gives license to their speculative methods and overweening goals.

A recent RAND Corporation paper argues against reduced defense spending on the basis that "the US defense burden is now quite low by historical standards."⁸ Defense Secretary Cohen likewise accentuates the post-Cold War decline in the proportion of gross national product that America devotes to defense. But it is a peculiar parochialism that compares today's defense investment rate with that of the Reagan era while ignoring comparisons between the United States and its competitors.

The United States continues to invest more of its national product in defense than does its allies, more than the world average, and much more than its chief economic competitors. By disregarding the requirements and consequences of increased global economic competition, present policy makes an unacknowledged bet about the future: The Soviet Union is gone and no comparable military challenge to the West exists, except as distant possibility. Nonetheless, the American prospect depends as much as ever, if not more, on the specifically military aspects of strength. Of this much, the Uncertainty Hawks seem certain.

Notes

1. Winnefeld, The Post-Cold War Sizing Debate: Paradigms, Metaphors, and Disconnects (Santa Monica: RAND, 1992) page viii.
2. For 1986, "potential threats" include the former Warsaw Treaty states, China, Cuba, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Libya, Syria, and Vietnam. For 1995, Russia and Belarus replace the former Warsaw Treaty states.
3. Michael O'Hanlon, Defense Planning for the Late 1990's: Beyond the Desert Storm Framework (Washington DC: Brookings Institution, 1995).
4. David Abshire, "Toward an Agile Strategy," Washington Quarterly (Spring 1996) page 43.
5. Davis, "Protecting the Great Transition" in New Challenges for Defense Planning: Rethinking How Much is Enough (Santa Monica: RAND, 1994), page 140.
6. Winnefeld, page 15.
7. Travers, "A Strategic Breathing Space," Washington Quarterly (Spring 1997), page 107.
8. Paul Davis, et al., "Adaptiveness in National Defense: the Basis of a New Framework," RAND Issue Paper, August 1996.

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